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ABSTRACT

This paper describes Project TransND, a transition services project implemented jointly through the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, Office of Special Education, and the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation. This program helps prepare special education students to transition from high school to the work world. Project goals include designing, implementing, and improving an integrated transition planning and service delivery system that considers the unique characteristics of North Dakota; identifying and providing resources essential to transition planning and service delivery; and developing and delivering effective training for participants. The program divides the state into nine planning regions: eight geographic regions and one covering the state's four American Indian reservations. Each region has a regional governing board made up of local stakeholders who oversee activities related to transitional services. Each board employs a regional transition coordinator (RTC) who organizes an interagency network of transition services and responds to regional needs and concerns. Each region identifies goals and objectives that consider the local economic, population, and labor resources available. The nine RTCs meet monthly to collaborate and to exchange information. This regional approach has proven successful as it allows for local ownership, administration, and evaluation of services. Future program activities include various media projects, tracking of special education dropouts, identification of alternate programs, active student participation in program planning, and demonstration sites for pilot projects. (LP)

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"BIGGER ISN'T ALWAYS BETTER: MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF TRANSITION IN RURAL COMMUNITIES"

INTRODUCTION

Transition. The process and partnership of moving from one place to another. Change. It is evident when parents take their child to the first day of kindergarten, when the decision is made to attend college, marry or relocate. At any phase in our lives, transition is apparent. As in these examples, the extent of success depends on the cooperative planning of partners.

The same principle applies to transition from high school for special education students. Preparing students while still in school for adult roles is vital to reducing the statistics regarding high unemployment and substandard wages experienced by many individuals with disabilities. Partnerships formed between community and classroom on behalf of transitioning students are able to tailor needs and outcomes. The small community has not relented to metropolitan pressure, but rather, developed an "attitude" of rural development and renewal designed to "take care of its own." Rural communities have achieved so much with so little from a need to be self sufficient.

As a partner, schools have also become a force in rural communities and, as a result, turn to their community as a curriculum source. This partnership has become the most successful collaboration for transition. This is not a new concept by any means, and has been in place and used successfully by educators for decades. But the inclusion of special education has brought a new focus to the local "team" who initiate, implement and evaluate services to ensure youth receiving special education will have the opportunity and necessary supports to become caring, productive and social citizens. Quality education and outcomes do not have to be compromised in even the smallest of communities. To portray a picture of North Dakota, visualize 668,800 residents sharing 71,000 square miles (9.4 residents per sq mile) in a state ranked 50th for violent and property crimes (Boyd, 1991). Picture 128,085 students in grades K - 12, a graduation rate of 97% plus for high school seniors, 639 schools (including 11 one room schools) and a teaching staff of 7078, of which 1107 are special educators, for a ratio of 18 students per teacher (Messmer, 1994). Paint a labor force of agriculture, retail services, government and manufacturing, to a State unemployment rate of 3.5%, as of October 1994 (Boyd, 1994). This, is rural at its best.

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NORTH DAKOTA'S PROJECT

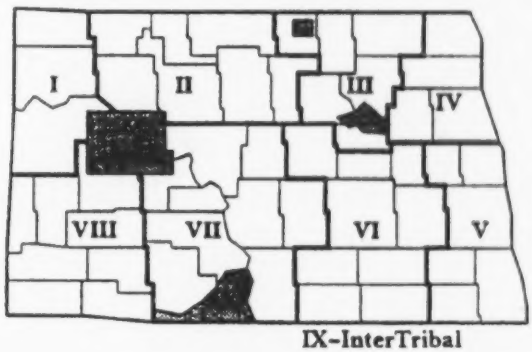
In pursuit of IDEA compliance and developing "best practices" for transition services, the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction, Office of Special Education, and the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation jointly received funding for the five year grant **Project TransND** in October, 1992. Transition services are directed to those students receiving special education, ages 14 to 21. A five member Steering Committee includes key representatives from Special Education, Vocational Rehabilitation, the Division of Developmental Disabilities, Job Services, and Vocational and Technical Education. Their role surrounds a cooperative interagency initiative with the goal of improving statewide transition services. A State Coordinator is responsible for adherence to and compliance with the grant's goals and objectives, and to coordinate field services. Twenty statewide stakeholders serve on the State Transition Planning Council (STPC) and address statewide implementation of transition. The Council includes educators, parents and agency representatives.

Primary **TransND** project goals are to:

* design, implement and improve an integrated transition planning and service delivery system that meets the needs of youth with disabilities and that considers the unique characteristics of North Dakota;

* identify and provide resources essential to support and integrate transition planning and service delivery; and

* develop and deliver training to support the participants optimal use of the transition planning and service delivery system.



IX-InterTribal

As identified in the state map, the grant's focus and strength is regional service delivery. The balance of statewide systems change and local autonomy allows for flexible planning and implementation of transition services. The Transition Grant

divides the state geographically according to the eight governor's planning regions with North Dakota's four Indian reservations making up the ninth region. Each region has a Regional Governing Board made up of local stakeholders who oversee activities surrounding transition.

REGIONAL CONCEPT

Each Board employs a Regional Transition Coordinator (RTC). The role of the RTC is to coordinate an interagency network to assist individuals with disabilities transition from high school to adult community living with emphasis on a statewide system change process. The RTC responds to the regional needs, issues and concerns of local stakeholders(students, parents, teachers and adult service providers). The RTC is available to address such concerns through:

* one on one or group consultations with students, teachers parents, consumers or agency personnel;
* provide information and expertise regarding school, community and agency support;
* coordinate an interagency transition network;
* work with students and families to plan and facilitate transition;
* attend and facilitate IEP meetings;
* develop transition related materials;
* act as a liaison between school, home and agency providers;
* provide training/inservice;
* collect data through needs assessment and follow up studies.

Each region identifies goals and objectives, with consideration of their unique characteristics. This allows for successful transition given the local economic, population, and labor resources available, yet with the collaboration of state personnel and resources. Commonly referred to as "grassroots", North Dakota's regional approach allows for local ownership, administration and evaluation of services. Each region has the opportunity to create local advisory committees in such parameters as a school, community or county, where local stakeholders determine and carry out transition. It is in this context, where transition is evident and used in the smallest of communities across the state that success becomes obvious. According to Job Service North Dakota's 1990 Census, 95% of ND communities (347) had a population of 2500 or less (Boyd, 1991).

The Native American population on the four reservations identifies a distinct value system, depressed and rural economic conditions. These factors can not always be included in typical programming. Specific goals and objectives taking these issues into consideration result in minority appropriate transition directives.

Other facets of the **TransND** grant include a media center, which currently displays 1100 items to include videos, articles, books, projects, etc. Additional funding is sub-contracted with agencies to provide independent living skill training to students, teachers, parents and agency personnel to supplement current curriculum and available resources. This is accomplished by classroom sessions, one-on-one instruction, inservice training, informational meetings, media publications and referrals. A data management portion of the grant allows for development of a statewide system of data collection and distribution in compatible formats useful for local facilities to plan future services/curriculum, adult service needs and log student activities. Data management reports are pending from 205 follow-up special education student interviews. These students exited the school during the 1992-93 school year. These will be used for comparison studies with general education exitors from the same year.

REGIONAL COORDINATORS

Components of the **TransND** Project have been identified as pivotal to the success of the Project, which could be duplicated. The role of the Regional Transition Coordinators is the nucleus of the Project and has proven to be an essential component. Initially, regional goals were identified following a needs assessment conducted by each RTC with dozens of transition stakeholders within their region. This is repeated annually to ensure movement towards "systems change" and to establish local goals within the realm of all partners. The availability of the Coordinators ensures compliance and implementation for all partners. Their role in coordinating and facilitating meetings, processes and outcomes has served as a model for teachers and agency personnel. The RTCs demonstrate and instruct teachers how to be creative with curriculum to build opportunities for students in non-traditional, but successful methods of instruction. Providing training and information as to rights and responsibilities for parents and students have contributed to their increased role, support and success in transition.

The RTCs identified a focus on student determination. Too often they found students who did not understand their disability, how it related to their ability to learn, and the need for alternate methods. Not only did they not understand it themselves, they had no inclination that they would need to explain this information to a prospective employer, classmate or post secondary school in the future. Students need to know how to explain any limitations and also to ask for what they may need

in the classroom or work place. It is not possible for any student to feel healthy about his/her disability unless it is understood and how it affects that student as an individual, in the classroom or on the job, with peers and family. Making successful decisions about personal future goals can only be done if the student has full knowledge about the implications of a disability. Information about disabilities, self determination, decision making and goal setting can be accomplished through curriculum, class discussions, group and individual projects and individual meetings with students. Addressing these issues at the time of the IEP is practical to include input from parents and teachers as well as to address their role to facilitate the student's growth.

LOCAL OWNERSHIP

The employer-employee relationship of the RTC and Board reaffirms local ownership. Although geographically isolated from each other, the nine RTCs meet monthly to collaborate, exchange information as to activities and complete projects. Inasmuch as the RTC's are governed by regional direction, a foundation of activities is in place to ensure a level of compliance with parallel state goals and objectives. Training has been a significant issue for the RTC staff and the Project since its inception. Staff development and curriculum instruction for teachers and agency personnel include transition components, laws and legislation, IEP goals and the community as a curriculum resource, as well as interagency development and facilitation. Training has been on a level beyond "getting the word out", which encompasses the "how to" concept for small groups where questions, sharing and case studies are easily accepted.

COLLABORATION AND PARTNERSHIP

Subsequent to the success of the regional response to transition and the role of the RTCs, interagency cooperation on behalf of the project has become exemplary. Issues surrounding collaboration and partnership became forefront initially as the Project needed a local approach for partners to "buy in" to transition. Without collaboration, the recipients were not part of the process or outcome. The goal was to see tangible results at a level where participants benefit from the return (investment) from their represented perspective. The vision of personal and social rewards contribute to the cause beyond the requirements of the law. Such is the case for establishing local advisory committees, which add to the incentives for input, development and evaluation of services. Local advisory committees allow parents, teachers and agency personnel to decide what will happen and work toward that end.

Examples of cooperation include State and regional interagency agreements. Both identify those participating agencies, their agreed upon role and signed commitment for transition service delivery. In Fargo, two special education

units and an independent living center have cooperatively arranged for direct services for students ages 18-21 who have met their graduation requirements, but have uncompleted transition needs, primarily job related skills. Fiscal collaboration is evident in sharing of building space and staffing. Cooperation is apparent in parent information sessions in conjunction with agency personnel to provide a complete portrait of services available to students, as well as provide information as to planning and options for work, post secondary programs, community participation, recreation and leisure activities and independent living.

Community and school partnerships offer students the practical application of curriculum in work experiences as well as increased interpersonal/social skills. To initiate dialogue, informational meetings, breakfasts, inservice training, etc. between schools and community leaders and employers have been scheduled to ask, "What can we as a school do for you to better prepare our students for you? How can we make better employees for you? How can the community enhance the current curriculum in the work place and support training?"

To begin the process of local collaboration, identify goals. Examine school/community relationship as they currently exist, and then as the best they can be. Identify and commit those individuals who must implement the change to "own" the change. Understand the importance of knowing what measures will identify when you reach those goals and implement the logistics compatible with the traditions of the school and community. Participants will need to understand how to change and problem solve for effective results and growth. Then "take the show on the road" and let others know how your program was developed and implemented. A suggestion for success is to hold regular meetings, give participants a sense of belonging/ownership, monitor progress regularly and enforce positive directions (celebrate successes!) for members who may otherwise dwindle. As a footnote, follow the new procedures, ensure maintenance and provide an avenue for change and revisions as goals change.

WORK OPPORTUNITIES

The implementation of community based curricula is a valuable tool for successful transition and balances academics with vocational education. Guidelines for educators and employers address how to establish an employer site, regulations pertaining to the Fair Labor Standards Act and criteria for offering pay and/or credit. As an example, the Department of Public Instruction (Messmer, 1994) reveals the median district high school population in North Dakota to be 76 students (with ranges from 3238 to 12 students). It can be challenging to provide small communities and small schools with ample and varying resources for transition planning; they will experience far greater opportunities for personal instruction, interaction and evaluation. Region I for example, has eight secondary

schools, while Region VII has 46 secondary schools. Establishing similar goals would not allow for the unique characteristics in each region, while local identification results in tailored objectives.

An underestimated relationship in the transition process which can maximize success is that of the school and home. What happens at home can enforce or dismiss both the school and community efforts for transition. Including parents and students at all levels signifies their role in the "team." Throughout the state, several local advisory committees and regional governing boards are chaired by parents, who make up over 40% of the membership.

LOOKING AHEAD

Development and growth of the TransND project, as Fiscal Year Three commences, includes various media projects to encompass a student transition folder, a guidebook, newsletter, student checklist and transition video (pending production). Other projects include tracking of special education drop-outs and identification of alternate programs, peers attending and participating in the IEP meeting, planning and maintenance IEP meetings, and various demonstration sites for pilot projects.

Trends to be explored in the remainder of the grant focus on needs for both special and general educators as well as paraeducators, exploration and identification of those Project functions which can be targeted to exist independent of the Project, and additional demonstration sites of community based transition workshops with guidelines for statewide implementation. Developing a culture for learning in methods beyond the classroom in rural communities will be a priority. In North Dakota, nursing homes are found in most communities and offer employment in a variety of positions, whose skills can be utilized in the event of relocation and promotion. In conjunction, rural communities need to consider the advantages of designing and implementing programs, such as with nursing homes, to help students transition from school to work in their community.

Keeping this generation of students "at home" will be important for those communities searching for economic growth and stability. Systematic reform and strategies for changes in rural schools and communities involve a process at the school, community and classroom levels, which allow for student exploration, interactive modes of instruction and performance based assessments.

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